

Their Man in Managua
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By Congressman Dan Burton
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As Nicaragua prepares for what I hope will be another free, fair and transparent election, the people of that great country are faced with the choice of returning to a painful past, or embracing a democratic and prosperous future. While the choice may seem clear, Daniel Ortega, the same man who the Nicaraguan people have rejected as their choice for president for the last three elections, curiously appears to be leading in the polls. As a Member of Congress and a long-time friend and supporter of Nicaragua, I am deeply concerned for its future, especially if Mr. Ortega – or anyone associated with the corrupt, anti-democratic deal he struck with PLC strongman Arnoldo Aleman known as “el Pacto” – once again resumes power.

Since Mr. Ortega lost power in 1990, Nicaragua has embraced democracy and enjoyed all the economic fruits that freedom has to offer. Under the recently passed Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), exports have already grown dramatically from 25 to 50 percent and free trade zones are expanding, bringing good quality jobs back into the region. The Millennium Challenge Corporation is contributing \$175 million to help Nicaragua build roads and bridges, in an effort to expand its infrastructure. Perhaps most importantly, international financial institutions and assistance programs have grown increasingly confident about the Nicaraguan government, which provides an important stabilizing force for the local economy. Even tourism is even on the rise.

Considering all the positive economic developments taking place in Nicaragua, it is incomprehensible to me that the people of that country would choose to elect a leader whose track record is one of oppression and immeasurable suffering. When Mr. Ortega was in power, freedom of the press was taken away, and the Nicaraguan people lived in constant fear for their lives, never knowing when the knock on the door would come. War ravaged the country, killing at least 50,000 people. The economy was a shambles: property was taken away from private citizens, poverty was rampant, unemployment was sky high and near the end of the 1980s, inflation was at an astounding 33,000 percent. The fluctuation of the Cordoba was such that on a Friday, a hamburger and soda cost 500,000 Cordobas, yet by the following Monday, the Cordoba’s purchasing power had already depreciated by 10 percent.

Worse yet, Mr. Ortega’s sudden rise to popularity has been carefully helped along by his “good friends” in the region, Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro. Mr. Chavez has made it clear that Ortega is his candidate of choice, and in recent speeches made by the presidential hopeful, it is clear that Mr. Ortega has taken a liking to his Venezuelan friend. Ortega’s campaign speeches advocating a mixed economic model, and promising to renegotiate CAFTA, which is already an economic success story, leave me with little hope that Mr. Ortega would approach this presidency as a man looking to strengthen the

democracy already thriving in Nicaragua and would, instead, tie his regime to the flawed policies of Mr. Chavez and Mr. Castro.

As the people of Venezuela have suffered under Mr. Chavez's leadership, so would the people of Nicaragua under Mr. Ortega. Some estimate that as many as 50,000 jobs could be lost. As much as \$800 million in remittances, hard-earned money from loved ones abroad, could become subject to exorbitant government taxes, with the end result that the Nicaraguan people will have far less money to live on and provide for their families than they do now. Further, the value of the Cordoba will plummet as inflation skyrockets, and economic investment will dry up as regional stability crumbles.

This is a grim future not only for the Nicaraguan people, but also for the people of the United States. The U.S. and Nicaragua have enjoyed a great relationship in recent years, but I fear that if Mr. Ortega wins the November 5th election, this relationship will deteriorate quickly. Mr. Ortega's close friendship with other leaders in the region, who have made their disgust and hatred for the United States well known, is sure to have a negative impact on Nicaragua's relationships with her neighbors and friends abroad.

Fidel Castro has a long history of attempting to spread revolution across the globe and Hugo Chavez has wasted little time in courting the enemies of freedom worldwide, including terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as the terror-sponsoring regimes in Iran and North Korea; all of which are determined to bring about an end to democracy wherever it thrives. Should Ortega – their man in Managua – actually win the election, our enemies will be that much closer to our borders.

As George Santayana, the famed philosopher, once said, those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Mr. Ortega destroyed Nicaragua once and, if given the chance, he will do it again. When the good people of Nicaragua go to the polls in November, I hope they will look past the rhetoric and look into what each candidate has to offer. If they do, in the case of Mr. Ortega, they will find there is nothing there but false promises and a long history of economic stagnation and oppression. Faced with that kind of choice, I have every hope and expectation the people of Nicaragua will vote for a candidate who will lead them into a bright future.

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